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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a six-year study, the first of which was a two-year language arts program that began with four year olds, and the second part of which was a four-year effort to trace the progress made in reading by children who participated in that program as compared with the reading achievement of classmates who had not been participants. The chief aim of the two year preschool program was to provide participants with enjoyable language arts experiences from which they might or might not learn to read. The only requirement of this group was that they be four years old by December of the school year. Findings showed that when differences in intelligence test scores were accounted for, children in the experimental program obtained higher mean scores on reading tests during grades one through four. At the end of grades one and two, differences were large enough to merit statistical significance, but at the end of grades three and four, this was not the case. (HCD)

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A SIX-YEAR STUDY OF CHILDREN WHO LEARNED TO READ IN SCHOOL AT THE AGE OF FOUR*

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The six-year study to which the title of my paper refers divided into two parts. The first part was a two-year language arts program that began with four-year-olds. The second part of the research, which is what I'll be describing today, was a four-year effort to trace the progress made in reading by children who participated in that program and, secondly, to compare it with the reading achievement of classmates who had not been participants. Because the whole of the six-year study stemmed from some earlier research I had done, I would like to refer to the earlier studies just briefly.

From 1958 until 1963, years that now seem like the dim past, I conducted two studies of children who learned to read at home before they entered school. The first study traced the achievement of one group of early readers until they finished third grade; the other followed a second group's progress until sixth grade (1).

Two findings from these studies prompted the research I'll summarize this afternoon. The first finding was that the early readers maintained their lead over comparably bright non-early readers. The second finding had to do with how the children acquired reading ability at home. According to parent-interview data, it was achieved in ways that were both interesting and enjoyable for the children.

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*A detailed report of this study, which was funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, will appear in Reading Research Quarterly in the Fall Issue, 1974.

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With this combination of findings, it was natural to contemplate a school program that would try to duplicate what I had learned from studying out-of-school accomplishments in reading. Eventually, in the fall of 1967 to be exact, I initiated such a program for four-year-olds. The two-year program began with fours because that had been the age most commonly cited by parents of early readers as the time when their children began to show an interest in reading.

What participants learned in the two-year program was described in a report published in the summer of 1970 in the Reading Research Quarterly (2). Consequently I'll not repeat that description today. In fact, all I want to say today about the two year pre-first grade program is that maximum achievement in reading was never its goal. Rather, the chief aim was to provide participants with enjoyable language arts experiences from which they might or might not learn to read. To be noted, too, is that children were not selected for the program on the basis of their being formally assessed as "ready" to read. Actually, the only requirement was that a child would have a fourth birthday by December; the program itself started in September.

Today, my purpose is to summarize reading achievement data for program participants during grades one to four and, secondly, to report on their progress as it compared with that of classmates who had not been participants. Before I do this, however, I need to comment about these classmates; that is, about the control group for the grade-one to grade-four comparison.

Although members of the control group had not been in my experimental program, all of them did attend kindergarten in the community in which the program took place. Earlier, when this community was selected for

the research, its single elementary school held to a highly traditional policy regarding readiness; that is, all entering first graders were started on a readiness rather than a reading program. This, actually, was one reason for choosing the community. Its policy, or so I thought, would let me compare the reading ability of children who had a chance to learn at the age of four with that of classmates who were not taught to read until first grade. Certain things happened, however, that altered research plans.

About a month after my experimental program got underway, some parents in the community who had children in first grade complained to the principal and then to the superintendent about the fact that four-year-olds in my program were learning to read whereas their first-grade children were not. By the following fall, to make a long story short, the readiness program in first grade was abandoned. In addition--and this affected my research--kindergarten teachers were directed to give some attention to numeral, letter, and word identifications. The change in kindergarten made for a change in the nature of the control group for my research. Now my study would compare the reading achievement of children who had been in my experimental program with that of classmates who had attended a kindergarten in which numeral, letter, and word identifications received attention.

Limited as I am today by a twelve-minute summary, I decided the best way to report on findings is through tables, which I'll distribute shortly. In essence, the tables say this: When differences in intelligence test scores are accounted for, children in the experimental program obtained higher mean scores on reading tests during grades 1-4. At the end of grades one and two, differences were large enough to merit statistical significance. At the end of grades three and four, this was not the case.

In the time that remains, I'd like to mention a few of the other things I learned while conducting the study.

What was learned very quickly has relevance for other researchers. I refer to the fact that it is not possible to assess with any accuracy the future value of pre-first grade starts in reading until schools are both able and willing to build on and thus extend the earlier achievement. In the case of my own study, I learned immediately--that is, at the start of first grade--that the changes required by this accommodation would not be forthcoming. More specifically, even though detailed descriptions of pre-first grade accomplishments were made available both to teachers and to the administration, research subjects still were given preprimers at the start of first grade. As a matter of fact, two weeks after they entered first grade, they were even given a readiness test. Why? In essence, the explanation for this and other observed practices was: tradition dies hard. It dies hard even when someone (myself, for instance) offers to help with the changes that must be made in traditional reading programs if earlier starts are to be taken advantage of and eventually appraised.

That we now know almost nothing about the possible value of earlier starts in reading is not exclusively accounted for, I must hasten to add, by the failure of schools to take advantage of pre-first grade reading ability. What must also be recognized is that researchers who have developed earlier school programs and, I might add, have extensively publicized them, have not always done the kind of longitudinal work that ought to be a part of their research efforts. Last summer, when I was preparing a detailed report of my own study, I wrote to everyone I knew or had heard about who had some connection with early school programs.

In my letter I requested information about the long-term effects of their programs. There were two disappointments in connection with this request. The first was the number of unanswered letters. The other disappointment was that most of the responses that did arrive were comprised not of longitudinal data but of advertisements for materials connected with a program that were now commercially available. It would seem, I'd like to suggest, that programs ought to be evaluated over a reasonable period of time before anything is done to advertise and sell them.

The other and final observation I want to make has to do with the national move toward earlier starts in reading--for instance, in the kindergarten. From the many contacts I've had with schools, I have arrived at this conclusion: why many schools are now teaching reading in kindergarten has nothing to do with what we actually know about earlier starts. As I mentioned before, we know practically nothing about them insofar as their long-range effects are concerned. Why, then, are schools quickly moving toward kindergarten reading? For reasons like: parental pressure; a desire to keep up with the Joneses, that is, with other schools that are teaching reading earlier; the availability of materials said by their publishers to be designed for the kindergarten; and finally, because of a dissatisfaction with the more traditional kindergarten curriculum.

If anyone asks, "Are we now teaching reading in kindergarten because of what has been uncovered by research?" I would have to say, "No. It is being taught for reasons that have little connection with research and, in some cases, for reasons that would be easy to describe but very difficult to defend."

REFERENCES

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2. _____. "A Language Arts Program for Pre-First Grade Children: Two-Year Achievement Report," Reading Research Quarterly, V (Summer, 1970), 534-565.

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